

**Public Hearing on DCR Transportation Enhancement Grant for High Bridge Rail
Trail Master Plan
March 2, 2004
Prince Edward County Courthouse
Farmville, VA**

Hearing Officer: Leon E. App
Chief Deputy Director
Department of Conservation and Recreation

Mr. App: Good Evening, I would like to call this hearing to order. I am Leon App, Chief Deputy Director for the Department of Conservation and Recreation. I will be serving as the hearing officer this evening. I would like to welcome you to this hearing.

I know that we have a number of members of various Boards of Supervisors here. I see that we have Sherry Swinson from Cumberland County, also a member of our Board of Conservation and Recreation.

If you are an elected official would you please stand. (Note: At this point elected representatives of all the involved localities stood and introduced themselves. The entire Prince Edward County Board of Supervisors were present.)

I would like to recognize Dr. Wilkie Chaffin, Secretary/Treasurer for the Virginia Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts.

Also here with us is Sarah Corey, with Norfolk and Southern.

With me tonight I have Robert Munson, Departmental Planning Manager for DCR's Division of Planning and Recreation resources. Bob will serve as our technical presenter.

Also with me is Michael R. Fletcher, DCR Director of Development. Michael will be audio taping our meeting and developing a set of minutes that will be entered online under the Commonwealth's town hall.

I hope that all of you have signed in on our attendance list. If not, please do so. Those wishing to speak should sign in on the speaker's list as well.

Purpose of the public hearing:

The purpose of this hearing is to receive input from interested citizens on the proposed DCR application for grant funding through the transportation enhancement program for the High Bridge Rails-to-Trails project.

As you know, Norfolk Southern Railroad has announced their intent to abandon its line from Pamplin through Farmville to Burkeville. The abandonment must be approved by

the Surface Transportation Board. This hearing this evening really has nothing to do with whether this line is abandoned or not.

Norfolk Southern has offered to allow a rail banking condition to be implemented on the corridor if abandonment is granted, and if the Commonwealth is interested in doing so.

The General Assembly has passed legislation, House Bill 643, with Delegate Watkins M. Abbitt, Jr. as Chief Patron and Delegates Clarke N. Hogan and R. Lee Ware and Senator Frank M. Ruff, Jr. serving as co-patrons. The bill allows the Department of Conservation and Recreation to accept the rail corridor if abandonment is approved.

If abandonment is approved and the corridor is transferred to DCR, we feel that it is important to address the concerns of citizens in the communities along the corridor by engaging them in the planning process that will result in a master plan for the new state park.

Therefore, we are applying for funding assistance of \$250,000 through the transportation enhancement program so that a consultant can be employed to develop a master plan for the park.

We have included in this application a \$250,000 request for funding for gates, signs and other items that may be needed to secure the corridor from inappropriate uses during the transition phase from railroad to park.

This concludes my introductory remarks. I would like to introduce Robert Munson, a DCR planner, who will explain in a little more detail what we are proposing to do with the grant funding proposal.

Mr. Munson: Thank you Mr. App.

As Mr. App indicated this hearing is about this enhancement grant application we are applying for. I want to explain what the grant includes.

We are applying for \$250,000. Enhancement funds are on an 80-20 match. \$200,000 of that \$250,000 will come from the transportation fund. \$50,000 has to come from us. We are assuming that if the railroad donates to us this corridor the value of the corridor can be used as the match.

If the railroad decides not to donate we will have to come up with \$50,000 some other way. If the railroad abandons the line and the property comes to DCR, we will have to come up with the \$50,000. If the railroad either does not abandon the property or the Surface Transportation Board does not approve the rail banking condition, we will not apply for this money.

In other words we are only going to get this money if the corridor comes to the state and DCR is asked to develop it into a state park.

What will we do with the \$250,000?

First we will develop a community communications plan. A way to communicate with the community throughout the development of this master plan. That may involve a newsletter as a way to keep people up to date, current bulletins in local newspapers. We may identify all landowners along the corridor and put them on a mailing list so that they are kept well informed.

Our goal is to make this a community effort to develop a master plan for this park, and that everybody that has an interest in it has had the wherewithal to participate.

Next, we are asking for money to do an engineering study of the railroad structures. During our preliminary discussions it has come to our attention that there are historic culverts that are lined with bricks. We want to identify what historic and important cultural resources there are on the corridor so that we go right to work on restoring and protecting them.

We will do a phase one environmental study. Before we can take any property and begin any kind of public improvements on that property we have to investigate the corridor to make sure there are no hazardous waste sites, no old spill that was not properly cleaned up. Nothing that would make it a burden on the state to clean up so that we know exactly what we are getting. We want to make sure we are working closely with the railroad. We will hire an environmental engineering firm that will make a full inventory of the corridor so that we know exactly what we are getting and what needs to be done to make it safe for public use.

We will do a boundary survey and title work. We may have some questions we need to address. We want to make sure we have the money to address those types of things.

The bulk of the money will be for us to put out a request for proposal to the consultant community for the master plan. We will put out a request for proposal to the consultant community at large, folks who do master plans. The normal process is that people interested in doing a master plan will respond and we will pick six or seven firms to interview. We will go to work with time for you to be involved in the master plan process. Master plans normally take about a year to do.

We will have at least two full public input meeting during the master plan process. One up front where we identify issues, problems, etc. and where people see where we are going with this. There will be a committee that is developed right up front to work with the consultants.

At various points we will come back with and touch base with the public at large to make sure we are on track you understand where we are.

At the end of the public process we will have a public meeting to say this is our plan and where we plan to go with this.

Towns along the way, land owners, people with vision of how they want to participate will all have an opportunity to roll up their sleeves and join in this. We are very excited about the opportunity.

We will have the opportunity to bring High Bridge to the public eye. We can do a good job of telling of Lee's Retreat. We already administer Sailor's Creek Battlefield. Appomattox Courthouse is right down the road. The folks at Appomattox Courthouse are excited about the opportunity to connect from Pamplin to the Court House.

Thank you.

Mr. App: Thank you Robert. Before we move to the speaker's list, I would like to recognize our co-host for the hearing, Prince Edward County, represented by Mildred G. Hampton, Prince Edward County Administrator and Sarah E. Puckett, Prince Edward County Assistant Administrator. Ms. Hampton said that she may have to leave, but Sarah Puckett is here. Sarah, Do you have anything you want to say?

Ms. Puckett: No, thank you.

Mr. App: We will now go to the speaker's list. If you have anything in writing we can include it with the records. Our first speaker is Mrs. Laura Rice from Cumberland County.

Mrs. Rice: I have heard this presentation several times. My concern is from the homeowner's perspective. Our home is within shouting range of the bridge. We hope this will be a positive thing.

Part of the historic structure is on the edge of our property line. We will be the most impacted by the coming and leaving that will impact the project. We are interested in being a part of the project.

We hope other landowners will take an active interest in the program and help us route this in the right direction.

Mr. App: Thank you Mrs. Rice. We share those concerns. The next speaker is Robin Buckalew.

Ms. Buckalew: I think I'll pass, thank you.

Mr. App: Those are the only two that have signed up. Are there other speakers who would like to speak this evening?

Mr. Munson: I also want to point out that included in the grant is money for gates, signage and other control structures to make sure that many of the interests are address and to protect private property rights along this park.

Mr. App: We have had several other opportunities to develop this type of property. We only own one, the New River Trail is about 57 miles along the New River. This is now the second most visited park in our system with over one million visitors a year, with the biggest being First Landing at Virginia Beach. That trail is rapidly gaining in that area. As those of you in local government recognize what this can do for you, they are already realizing it along that trail.

Any other comments this evening? Yes ma'am.

Sandy Wilcox: I'm Sandy Wilcox and I would just like to voice my support for the trail. Having two teenage kids this would be wonderful for them. I do support them and I would certainly support any homeowners interests along the trail. I see for the citizens of this community that this is a wonderful opportunity.

Closing

Mr. App: I want to thank you for coming out this evening and sharing your thoughts with us. In the event the abandonment is made and DCR becomes the holder of the property, we want to provide a smooth transition from Norfolk Southern to DCR, and to provide security to the facility and to develop a master plan for the trail that will enhance the region. This hearing is now closed.

The Department of Conservation and Recreation expresses appreciation to Prince Edward County for co-hosting and providing the space for this hearing.

I hope that everyone has a safe trip home.